THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

JUST DO IT

January 31, 1999
John M. Buchanan

Praise God for all sides of life, for friends, lovers, art, literature, knowledge, humor, politics, and for the little red cloud away there in the west.

> You say grace before meals.
> All right.
> But I say grace before the play and the opera,
> And grace before the concert and pantomine,
> And grace before I open a book,
> And grace before sketching, painting,
> Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing;
> And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.
>
> Dudley Barber
> *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography*

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JUST DO IT
January 31, 1999
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Micah 6:1-8
Matthew 5:1-12
". . . what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

> Dear God, "With what should we come before you?" the prophet asked. We come with our hopes, our fears, our love. We come with our dissatisfaction with the way things are in our lives, our community, our world. We come wanting to be different and to make a difference. We come in expectation that you accept our being here and that you help us be all you want us to be.
> Now, startle us with your truth. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

Just do it.

The ad campaign with "Just Do It," as its theme, I was told by a Chicago marketing executive, was the most successful in advertising history. It was founded on the style, presence, grace, smile, and transparent, disciplined commitment of Michael Jordan. It made Nike and "MJ" household words virtually everywhere in the world. Its premise is provocative, namely, that we know what we want to be, what we can be, and, furthermore, we know what it takes. What we lack and have to get somehow, somewhere, perhaps in a new pair of $200 sneakers, or generate within our souls, literally, is moral courage, commitment, a willingness to sacrifice in order to radically refocus our lives to do whatever it is—run faster, lift more weight, lose 20 pounds, stop drinking, change jobs, go back to school, ask her to marry me, read more books, do more good things. Just do it.

There is a great hunger for that kind of authenticity. We respond when we see it. It's what we loved so much about Michael, and we long for it in our own lives. But there is also a contrary dynamic, a tendency in each of us to take the easy way, to find a shortcut. We are, as the old prayer of confession puts it so eloquently, "slothful in good." It's a cultural dynamic, perhaps best illustrated by the electronic keyboard you can buy that will allow you to play popular tunes, even light classics, without knowing a thing about music. (See *Homiletics* Jan/Feb 1999). You know the story of the tourist in Manhattan on the way to a concert, slightly lost, who sees a man carrying a violin case and asks, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice," the musician answered.

Musicianship requires a gift and practice, disciplined, daily practice. Without discipline, the gift doesn't amount to much. I grew up in a culture in which kids were expected to play a sport and a musical instrument, and you didn't get to do the first until you had completed the second. After school, 30 minutes of practice, no exceptions, then playtime; the half hour measured on the kitchen timer, which my mother would set as I began and which,

when I was sure she wasn't looking, would occasionally sneak out and turn forward a bit to pick up a few minutes of baseball. "You don't have to practice every day," was the policy in one household, "only on the days you want to eat." (*Ibid. Homiletics*).

Just do it.

Bishop Desmond Tutu spoke at an ecumenical gathering of young people over the holidays. 1,300 college students showed up, and he told them that integrity and authenticity were what they were most looking for, and he offered them an ancient formula: "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God."

"With what shall I come before the Lord?" a man asked two and a half millennia ago.

It is perhaps the best question anybody ever asked. It is, when you think about it, <u>the</u> question, the basic human question, the fundamental human question. People in the Bible asked it all the time.

> "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"
> "What must I do to live?"
> "What must I do to be saved?"

What's the secret of life—real, full-to-overflowing, brimming-with-vitality life?

> What can I do to really live?
> What must I do?
> What should I do?

One of the oldest variations of the question comes from the 8th Century B.C., from a Hebrew prophet by the name of Micah. His version reads, "With what shall I come before the Lord?"

There it is, "What should I do?"

The prophet provides a list of rhetorical answers, which grows in fervor and flamboyance. Will a simple bow do, a nod of the head, an occasional trip to church? Or is it a burnt offering you want—a yearling calf—quite a nice gift, actually. Or does God want a thousand rams from the man who has real resources, or ten thousand rivers of oil from the king? Hyperbole, of course, but you get the point. And, although child sacrifice was condemned in Israel, it was practiced in the ancient world; perhaps that is what God wants—the final, ultimate proof of the authenticity of my desire, my determination to get right with God—the life of my first born.

That list, hyperbole and all, is a 2,700 year-old prescripted answer to life's basic question. It is how religion was practiced by Israel's neighbors—ritual sacrifices to appease and impress the gods.

Occasionally, Israel misused its own sacrificial system to appease and impress God. Micah said all of it misses the point totally:

He has told you what is good;
You know what the Lord requires:
Do justice
Love kindness
Walk humbly with God.

Just do it!

It is a consistent Biblical motif, that call to integrity—to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Amos:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, your solemn assemblies, your burnt offerings, your songs.
Let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

and Jesus:

"If you love me, Peter, feed my sheep."
"The one who hears these words and does them is like a man who built his house on a rock."

Just do it.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman says it doesn't take a genius to understand that religious ceremony and worship services that are not accompanied by social action—acts of love, mercy, and justice—are hypocritical, empty, and soon irrelevant.

We have learned that here, and if we have anything to share with the larger church, this is it. We ask new members why they decided to join this church, or why, after maybe years of living on the spiritual margins they decided to affirm their faith in Jesus Christ. The answers almost always have something to do with authenticity. If you belong here, your faith makes a difference in the lives of other people.

Forrest Church, the distinguished pastor of Manhattan's Unitarian Church of All Souls, was asked by a news reporter recently to what he attributed the unprecedented numbers of young professional people coming to church these days. Forrest answered, "Because their generation—Baby Boomers, Generation X—tried materialism, and it didn't work. We immersed ourselves in this incredibly profitable and opportunistic economy. We made more money than anyone ever imagined we would; our life style is enhanced beyond our wildest expectations and hopes, and at the end of the day we ask, 'Is this all there is?'" He's right, I believe. Jesus is right, I believe. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Micah is right. You know what God requires—you know what life requires of all of us.

Just do it.

Do justice. It's not particularly a comfortable topic for us, but it is a consistent and persistent biblical theme. God is most interested in justice, not simply in fair play, but in society's determination to deal compassionately and justly with the poor, the marginalized. The preferential option for the poor, the Catholic bishops called it one time, and it makes

the non-poor, namely us, uncomfortable. It takes spiritual maturity to be able to acknowledge that most of us were born into families and social networks that gave us access to power, privilege and success. We didn't earn it. It has nothing to do with our intelligence or ability or energy. I was fortunate enough to be born into a family with parents who conveyed values, discipline, aspiration; parents who took me to church and all the right places, who read books and newspapers, and taught me the value of the word; who insisted that I brush my teeth, stand up straight, say please and thank you, that I not talk with my mouth full, and put the knife down before lifting the fork. I was not turned away from anything because of my skin color, name, address, or family heritage. But that is not so for millions of Americans, some of whom are our neighbors.

Do justice.

Brueggeman says, "Be actively engaged in the redistribution of power in the world, to correct the systemic inequalities that marginalize some for the excessive enhancement of others." That makes us nervous. It's too radical. But it is what God requires, I believe. It is what justice in the Bible is and it is what Jesus Christ calls us to be and do. It's providing clothing for those 40 homeless men and women who used to sleep on Lower Wacker Drive and who are now in rehabilitation programs, but it is also acting on the systemic reasons for homelessness and the existence of a permanent under class of men and women—unemployed, sick—in this time of unprecedented affluence. It is also, today, to speak a word for them and to the political powers and economic interests that have decided to banish them from the place they have found shelter, warmth and community. Did we really need to do that? Are we that embarrassed by them?

It is tutoring youngsters whose environment doesn't work for them as yours and mine did, but in many ways against them. But it is also confronting politically the structures that create and maintain a culture of poverty: inadequately funded schools, for instance; health care, for instance; child care for single mothers who want to work; public transportation; jobs. Do justice.

Thirty-five years ago, the Presbyterian church committed itself to the struggle for racial equality. It was, and is, a justice issue with its roots in the prophetic tradition of Micah, Amos and Jesus. Presbyterian money was invested, staff and programs were committed. Presbyterians started to protest, march, sit-in, and get arrested; some were hurt; one was killed in Cleveland. The Stated Clerk of our General Assembly, Eugene Carson Blake, was arrested trying to integrate an amusement park outside Baltimore. It was an important moment for many people who had never seen Christian integrity before, who had never imagined that Christian people would actually do justice. I never loved my church more. I was never more proud to be a Presbyterian Christian. And I long for a renewal of that commitment to do justice in the world instead of our sad, recent obsession with keeping people out of leadership positions because of sexual orientation.

Just do it.

At the beginning of Jesus' teaching ministry, according to Matthew, there is a remarkable series of statements we know as the Beatitudes. It is a peculiar word, beatitude. It comes from a Greek word which means blessing, or the highest happiness. We've grown accustomed to the traditional translation:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .
Blessed are the meek . . .
Blessed are the merciful . . . ."

The statements are changed dramatically when they are read:

How happy are the poor in spirit
Happy are the meek
Happy are the merciful.

My guess is that we all are still asking the fundamental question, "What shall we do?" We all want a sense of authenticity about our lives, an integration, a balance, a living for something that truly matters, and, at the end of the day, peace, *shalom*, happiness, blessedness.

My guess is that we have already discovered that subtle reality that peace and happiness remain elusive when we are pursuing them ardently, frantically, almost desperately; that happiness and peace come as gifts of grace, always when we are occupied with something else, always when we are not thinking about them, working at them, striving for them, clasping at them.

I love the way the late Malcolm Muggeridge describes his interviews with Mother Theresa, and his observations on the work of her Sisters of Mercy. Muggeridge was on assignment with the BBC, and was in India to do a documentary on an extraordinary Albanian nun who had given her life to the care of the dying in the streets of Calcutta. Aesthetically, it was as bad as it gets. The poverty was quite unlike anything he had ever seen. The sick and dying simply lay where they were on corners and in gutters, begging for food and waiting for death. Mother Theresa's Sisters got up every day, said their prayers, and then went into the streets to minister to the dying, and, as space allowed, carried them back to the convent to be bathed, fed, and given a clean bed in which to die, she used to say, "in view of a loving face." There was a sense in which it could have been the most grim, most morbid business in the world.

What captivated Muggeridge, what lured him back to a simple but unshakable trust in Jesus Christ, was the remarkable reality that Mother Theresa and the Sisters of Mercy weren't grim and morbid at all, but happy—radiantly happy; not because they set out each day to discover happiness, but because they had found the key—the answer—in giving each day to Jesus, to being faithful, to following him, to obeying him, to doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with God.

Jesus said:

Happy are the poor in spirit—those who know that we own nothing ultimately.

He said:

Happy are those who mourn—those who love enough to risk a broken heart, those who make themselves vulnerable for love.

He said:

Happy are those who hunger for righteousness and goodness and truth and beauty.

Bonhoeffer said that the Beatitudes point back to Jesus, that their purpose is to invite us to trust him and to follow behind him—living each day in commitment and obedience to him.

With what shall we come before God?

God has told us:

do justice
love mercy
walk humbly.

With what shall we come? With what will you come?

God has told us—in Jesus Christ.

Just do it.

Amen.